

MUSEUM



TALK

SUMMER 1950

VOLUME XXV NUMBER 2

SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM
OF NATURAL HISTORY

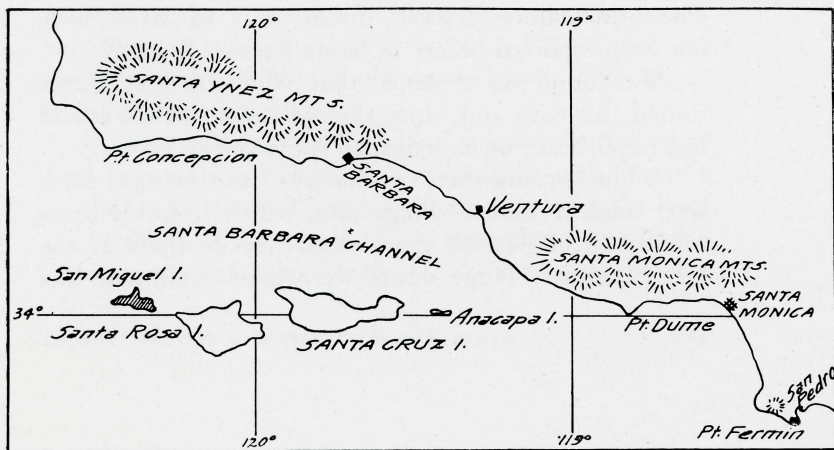
SANTA BARBARA • CALIFORNIA

ON SAN MIGUEL ISLAND

The Museum's study of the Channel Islands proceeds whenever opportunity arises. When the Navy gave Mr. Robert Brooks, lessee of San Miguel, thirty days to remove his sheep from the island, the curator of geology and anthropology with his assistant, Richard Finley, and David M. Gray volunteered to herd sheep in order to have a good look at the natural history of this westernmost of the Santa Barbara Islands.

David Gray, Jr. furnished our air transportation to the island where we joined the four Brooks men and started rounding up the half-wild sheep. These were driven in small bands to the harbor where they were loaded on a barge and taken to the mainland.

Early in the morning the Museum party would start across the barren wind-swept island on foot. While we gathered stray sheep, we looked for mammoth bones in the deep erosional gullies and for Indian remains on the tops of the huge dunes, recording and mapping our observations as we went.



Hours later we would join Don Butler and the ranch hands, who had combed the hills on horseback, and start the drive back to the corrals. Typically perverse, the sheep would break and run into gullies and ravines we had never seen before, so by the end of our two weeks, they had led us into almost every crack and cranny on the island, which is eight miles long and four wide.

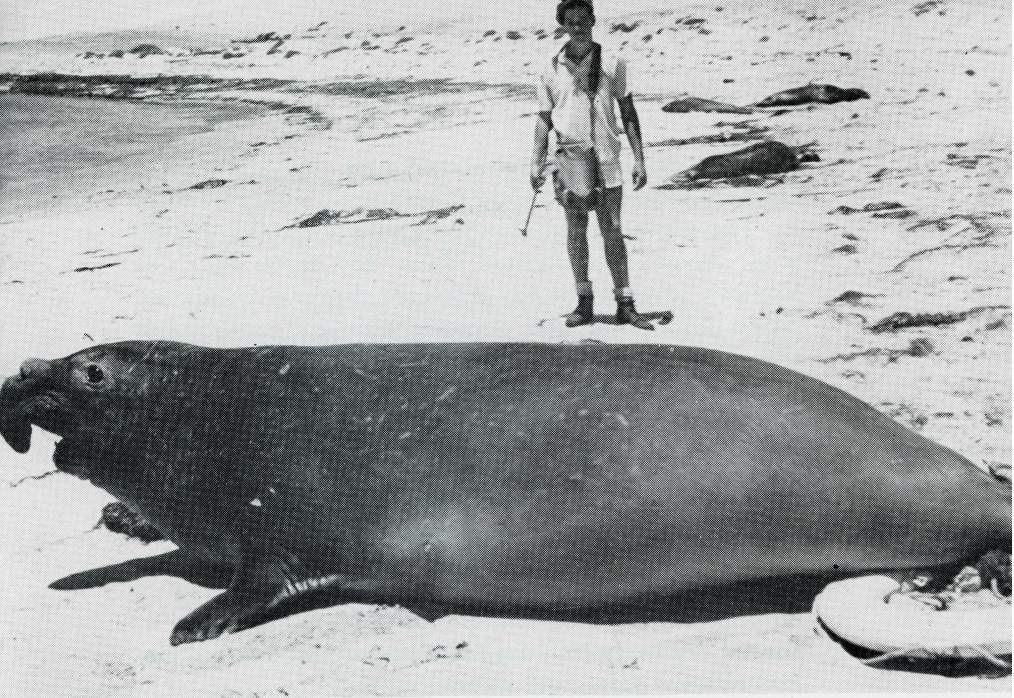
Naturally we discovered things. We found three localities of fossil elephants—more than had been located during the thirty years Mr. Brooks has leased the island. Of course, we were experienced after finding many on Santa Rosa Island. These mammoths died about a million years ago at the close of the Pleistocene Period after the islands became separated from the mainland.

Near the cliff where Ralph Hoffmann, former director of the Museum, lost his life in 1932 while collecting plants, we found a cave in which ancient Indians had been buried. This and two on Santa Rosa Island are the only instances of cave burials yet found on the islands or the adjacent mainland.

At the back of this cave were two small rooms with sparkling ceilings encrusted with crystals known as gypsum roses from the way they grow from the center. These uncommon crystals, found only in caves, have not been reported before in Santa Barbara County.

We found no evidence that white men had ever visited this cave and, since the old timers on the island had never heard of it, we called it Hoffmann Cave.

While herding sheep we surveyed and mapped some sixty ancient Indian village sites, which resemble those of San Nicolas Island more than they do those of the other islands. Huge dunes were piled high with the



A male elephant seal roused by David Gray

broken bones and shells which the Indians had carried from the ocean, sometimes several miles. Here and there the sand-cast ghosts of long-dead trees and shrubs projecting above the skyline show that this island, like San Nicolas, was not always barren. Except for two fig trees sheltered by the old ranch house, there are no living trees on the island.

At the west end of the island we were surprised to find over fifty sea elephants, or elephant seals, basking on the sandy beach. These marine mammals are the largest of the seals. The male has an extended snout and is much larger than the female. Unlike sea lions, they are

not easily disturbed and we could walk right up to them and take pictures, prodding them for an animated look.

This unwariness made them easy prey to the whalers who almost exterminated them for their oil. The Mexican government has protected them on Guadalupe Island since 1922 and elephant seals are reestablished there, but finding such numbers this far north was unexpected. Mr. Rett reported one at San Miguel in 1926 and in 1945 we saw two on San Nicolas Island. Under the strict protection of the California Fish and Game Commission we look for their numbers to increase in the Channel Islands.

We used all the still and movie film we had with us so Mr. Rett brought more cameras and film in a chartered plane flown by Russel Robinson. Our record of the sea elephants includes black and white photographs, kodachrome slides, and colored movies.

All species of the land-going marine mammals of this region were on San Miguel Island between June 21 and July 9. On the west end there were sea elephants and both California and Steller sea lions. On the south coast at Crook Point were harbor seals.

To young Dave Gray go the honors of the expedition for finding a perfect skull of the almost extinct sea otter. This animal, important in California history, was hunted to near extinction for its prized fur. Although once so abundant along this coast, there are only a few specimens in museums. The type specimen of the southern sea otter, in the U.S. National Museum, was taken on San Miguel Island by G. M. McGuire in 1904. Skeletal fragments occasionally turn up in Indian shell mounds but we had never found a complete skull.

Reid Moran, formerly of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden and now of the University of California, joined us briefly and collected plants, including seaweeds for algalogist Paul Silva.

A half mile from the dock in Cuyler Harbor, Prince Island (sometimes called Princess Island) is a rock about a half mile long and 330 feet high. At the west end, where cormorants were nesting, we found a large sea cave. At the entrance blue fishes swam among the brightly colored corals and algae. An inner passageway was filled with crystal-clear water which reflected the outside light in a wide green shaft like a neon tube.

Two elephant seals and a mixed group of California and Steller sea lions



As we rowed along the island and climbed to the top we could find no evidence that Indians had ever lived there nor any sign of Cabrillo's grave reputed to have been seen there. The only animal we found, besides the cormorants, seagulls and pelicans, was an alligator lizard, the first recorded from Prince Island.

Two lizards, a blue-bellied and an alligator, are known from San Miguel, as well as a slender salamander, but no snakes have been reported. The only land mammals are the island fox and a white-footed mouse.

San Miguel has had a varied and interesting history. Prehistorically, mammoths, foxes and mice roamed the forest. A drought may have destroyed the trees and vegetation on which the mammoths lived and they in turn became extinct, while the once abundant snails barely survived. Much later the Indians came in their plank canoes and for many centuries lived in and abandoned some fifty villages before the historic period began with Cabrillo's visit in 1542. Cabrillo died from an accident on San Miguel but history does not say where he was buried. Being a sailor, it is probable that he was buried at sea.

The Indians disappeared during the mission period and for the past hundred years the island has been used as a sheep ranch by various owners and lessees, George Nidever being one of the first. For some thirty years it has been owned by the U. S. Navy which began two years ago using it as a bombing target. To those who fear that Naval bombardment will destroy the island, let it be said that the might of man is puny compared to the elements which have been trying for a million years to blow this island into the sea. P.C.O.